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## **CONTEXTUALIZE THAT!**

### **A WORKSHOP TO MARK CHRISTOPHER POLLITT'S (PARTIAL/SEMI/INCHOATE) RETIREMENT**

A contribution to Session I

#### **Explaining contextual influences on the dynamics of public management reforms: Reflections on some ways forward**

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#### **Introduction**

As summed up by Christopher Pollitt in a recent co-authored paper based on a wide analysis of both academic and grey literature on the impact of (NPM-type) public management reforms in Europe, the development of scholarly knowledge about the understanding of contextual influences on the dynamics of public management reforms has led to the recognition that certain ‘factors’, properly positioned along time and scale dimensions, exert an influence in a certain direction (facilitate vs. prevent) on certain contents of public management reform (Pollitt and Dan, 2011, pp. 35-47). A state of the art which leaves the question ‘how can we then move forward and better qualify causal patterns?’ yet to be fully addressed, as is the case for related questions such as ‘how can we bridge the stream of research on public management reform trajectories in different countries<sup>2</sup> (which is by definition at a ‘macro’ level of analysis<sup>3</sup>) with strands of research in public management which aim at comprehending causes and effects of public management dynamics by uncovering what happens at more ‘micro’ a level (e.g., the stream of research on ‘Public Service Motivation’ – PSM, see recently Perry and Hondeghem, 2008, Vandenabeele and Hondeghem, 2008 - which is focused on the motivational structure of individuals working for the public sector)?’.

We here suggest three paths along which ‘developments’ might be achieved:

- by bringing ‘time’ (more systematically) in the analysis (specifically in dealing with the issue of ‘how to treat time in empirical research’ on the dynamics of public management reform);
- by bringing ‘micro-level’ theoretical frameworks in the analysis of macro-level trajectories of reform;

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<sup>2</sup> Introduced into the broader scholarly discourse in public management by Pollitt and Bouckaert in the first edition (2000) of their seminal book ‘Public Management reform: A Comparative Analysis’, and since widely debated.

<sup>3</sup> To employ a more nuanced view, Lynn and Colleagues (2001) distinguish four levels of reform, from the level of the global and national cultural environment to that of primary work - the institutional and the managerial levels being in between.

- by qualifying contextual influence, by way of revisiting the ‘notions of causality’ employed in studies on the dynamics of public management reform.

These themes are discussed in the remainder of the contribution.

## Bringing Time In

Our first suggestion revolves around the importance of more apt treatments of ‘time’ (Pierson, 2004, Streeck and Thelen, 2005, Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; and in public management Pollitt, 2008, Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2009) in the analysis of reform trajectories. In the approach we advocate, ‘context’ cannot (only) be intended statically as a set of factors<sup>4</sup> whose mere presence affects public management reform irrespective of how features of the politico-administrative context interact with the unfolding of administrative change over time. An approach to the analysis of contextual influences on public management reform dynamics whereby notions like ‘early events’, ‘path-breaking’ and ‘path-establishing’ events, sequencing, reactive sequences, interaction and collision of trajectories are part and parcel of the conceptual paraphernalia may, we would suggest, prove useful.

Examples may come from studies of administrative reforms in countries in the ‘Napoleonic’ administrative tradition (Painter and Peters, 2010<sup>5</sup>), like those conducted on France and Spain by, respectively, Bezes and deLidec, and Parrado (Bezes, 2009; Bezes and deLidec, 2010; Parrado, 2008 and 2011; and ongoing research work). Taking the French case first, in a perspective attentive to the sequencing of the reforms occurred since the 1980s<sup>6</sup>, decentralisation of functions and tasks to regional and local government has come first, at the very beginning of the 1980s, triggering *reactive* effects both on reforms of the organisation of the state (illustrative are the reinforced role of the prefects at the territorial level and the development of field offices of the central government ‘deconcentrated’ on the territory) and on reforms in other areas of public management, like personnel regulation (the reforms undertaken in 1983/84 had a strong thrust towards ensuring uniformity of treatment, hence in a certain sense ‘internal cohesion’, in the civil service across the levels of government: it thus does not appear improper to interpret it as a reaction to the perceived divisive effects of decentralization, with the purpose of ensuring that uniformity is kept in public services and administrative action).

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<sup>4</sup> By ‘factors’ we mainly refer here to what Pollitt and Dan label ‘deep-seated, long-lasting influences’ that are more often discussed in studies of contextual influences over public management reform than the ‘sudden events and chance happenings’, which as properly observed by the Authors may nonetheless have long-term consequences in the future (Pollitt and Dan, 2011, pp. 35-36).

<sup>5</sup> See also Ongaro (2008, 2009 and 2011) and Peters (2008).

<sup>6</sup> The reason for choosing the year 1980 is that, as noted by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 24), ‘[T]he changes since 1980 have – in many countries - been distinguished by an international character and a degree of political salience that make them out from the more parochial or technical changes of the preceding quarter century’.

In Spain too decentralisation, or devolution, towards the *Estado de las Autonomías* has been the first move, and definitely a path-breaking one, in the revamping of the public sector in the aftermath of the transition to democracy. In this case, its features of being asymmetric (both in the sense of being centred on the regional governments, instead of encompassing both regional and local governments in the transfer of functions as has been the case of France, and of being marked by a differential degree of ‘autonomy’ entrusted to certain regional governments that stand out of the others) as well as of having had in the fiscal/financial dimension a key element have contributed to make such reform an event with long-lasting effects also on other areas of public sector reform (like the reorganisation of the territorial services of the central state - see Parrado 2011). Such *path-breaking* as well as *path-establishing* event may be interpreted as a departure from the previous state of affairs in which the administrative system had in the uniformity of administrative action a centrepiece of its overall architecture. We observe in the Spanish case a sequence of events engendering self-sustaining change and averting the administrative system from the initial state, not counteracted by reactive sequences maintaining at least the broad traits of the previous state of affairs<sup>7</sup>. Both in the French and the Spanish case decentralisation to regional/local governments – an ‘institutional’ type of reform – has come first, deeply affecting the reforms dynamics over the successive decades.

Such examples may be illustrative of the case for interpreting the influence of context not (only) in a static way: contents and timing of reforms do matter.

Putting to work such approach requires addressing the issue of how to treat time in empirical research on the dynamics of public management reform. A starting point<sup>8</sup> is what Pettigrew (1990, 1992) refers to as ‘treating in an integrated way process, contents and context’. The key idea is that ‘the overall research challenge in our work is to link the content, contexts, and processes of change over time to explain the differential achievement of change objectives’<sup>9</sup>. Linkages can be distinguished for analytical purposes in vertical linkages (across levels of analysis) and horizontal linkages (of phenomena over time). The vertical level refers to the interdependences between higher or lower levels of analysis upon phenomena to be explained at some further level; for example, the impact of a changing socioeconomic context on what Pettigrew refers to in general terms as features of organisational and interest-group behaviour. The horizontal level refers to the sequential interconnectedness among phenomena in historical, present, and future time. The key points to emphasise in analysing change in a contextualist mode are, firstly, the importance of embeddedness, studying change in the context of interconnected levels of analysis (spatial/institutional, e.g. global;

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<sup>7</sup> Reactive sequences may also combine with initial sequences in averting the system from its initial state.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to the guidance of Ewan Ferlie (King’s College London) for many issues of methodology of research discussed throughout this paper and developed especially in this section.

<sup>9</sup> Pettigrew (1990, 268); though the statement was referred to a specific research project that the author was at the time conducting, we consider it makes the key point also for our case. In a similar vein, other analysts of organisational change have pinpointed the importance of detecting and probing into linkages across levels of analysis for explaining change and continuity (Goodman, 2000).

supranational; national; regional/local). Secondly, the importance of temporal interconnectedness, locating change in past, present, and future time. Thirdly, the need to explore context and action, how context is a product of action and vice versa, in a perspective according to which '[C]ontext is not just a stimulus environment but a nested arrangement of structures and processes where the subjective interpretations of actors perceiving, comprehending, learning and remembering help shape process. Thus processes are both constrained by contexts and shape contexts, either in the direction of preserving or altering them' (Pettigrew 1990, 269).

Treating in an integrated way process, contents and context has a number of implications. One is assessing what is 'proper' period of observation, hence one issue is that of when to make judgments about outcomes evaluations in a change process ('what' change has occurred, in qualitative and quantitative terms), which relates to the perspective from which 'change' and 'continuity' may be appreciated as such, since the selection of the time horizon may affect what is assessed as 'change' and what as 'continuity'. Quoting Pettigrew again, '[E]mpirically and theoretically, change and continuity are a matter of time. Any adequate empirical inquiry into change has to be capable of revealing the temporal patterns, causes, and movements from continuity to change and vice versa.' (Pettigrew 1990, 272). What are the most pertinent time frames (and time cycles) for the study of public management reform? The question has probably to be addressed 'inductively', in relation to the nature of the 'cases' students are investigating (maybe because of opportunistic considerations, like that of having them 'at hand's reach'), and national as well as (where pertinent) European Union (EU) conventional time frames may perhaps provide some guidance<sup>10</sup>. Authors like Abbott (1990) remind us there is the added complication that there may be different temporal patterns in the process occurring at different levels: what they call the non-equivalent temporal metric across levels of analysis. General guidance on this topic ('timeship') is provided by Pollitt (2008).

A second implication is that the emphasis on analysing processes as both constrained by contexts and shaping contexts may be gained if early events, sequencing and reactive sequences, path-breaking and path-establishing events, interaction and intersection of trajectories are part and parcel of the analysis of reform trajectories: such concepts should – we argue – enter the toolkit of students of public management reforms.

Finally, Pettigrew observes, 'The central assumption about causation in this kind of holistic analysis [is that] causation of change is neither linear nor singular - the search for a simple and singular grand theory of change is unlikely to bear fruit' (Pettigrew 1990, 269), and this seems to be a

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<sup>10</sup> At the national level, time frames may consider the period of leadership of the executive government at central level by the same prime minister/president (bearing in mind that its composition, and particularly the minister in charge of public administration, may change also more than once within the same executive leadership), and/or the electoral cycles. At the EU level, time frames may include the European Union 'planning and financing' seven year cycle as well as the interconnected time frames of majoritarian institutions (like the European Parliament or the European Council and the Council of Ministers), non-majoritarian institutions (like the European Court of Justice), and those that (as Authors like Goetz argue) are losing their non-majoritarian character (like the European Commission).

widely accepted conclusion by many comparativists in public management. From the theoretical point of view, the approach proposed by Pettigrew tends to put emphasis more on multiple conjunctural causation than singular linear causality (we discuss this issue in a subsequent section).

Pausing for looking at a distance the approach chosen for situating it in the ‘generalist vs. contextualist dilemma’ (Sminia 2009, 113), the approach advocated here obviously resides entirely in the contextualist pole - our basic argument in advocating it being that this approach is especially fruitful for the study of public management reform trajectories, as we assume ‘dependency’ of causal mechanisms on contextual factors to be ubiquitous<sup>11</sup> and of utmost importance in such complex phenomena. But approaches at the other pole may well claim their virtues: ‘at the extreme generalist end, process is simply seen as conforming to fixed flows and sequences that regulate how one event is followed by the next and automatically leads to a pre-programmed outcome. It is these law-like pattern[s] that then can be described by way of a positivist type of research.’ (Pettigrew, 1990).

Finally, to conclude this brief overview of some key issues in the treatment of time in the analysis of contextual influences on change process in the field of public management reform analysis, a remark on a methodological point: the pertinence of combining *events* and *variables* within the frame of a ‘case study’ (one of the most commonly employed research methodologies when a reform or a bundle of reforms in one or more countries or other jurisdictions are studied). Variables are here defined as the state of an entity or a property of an entity, events as ‘things that happen or take place’ (from the Oxford dictionary). A number of Authors have insisted on separating events and variables (Barzelay, 2001; Barzelay and Gallego, 2006, Mohr, 1982, Ragin, 1987); siding with Langley, we would instead argue that ‘the insistence on exclusion of variables from process research unnecessarily limits the variety of theories constructed. It may be important to understand the effect of events on the state of an entity (a variable) or to identify the effect of a contextual variable on the evolution of events’ (Langley 1999, p. 693). The combination of the two may be fruitful. In a similar vein, Sminia (2009), reflecting on the issue of whether and how strategic management may affect organizational performance (the author is referring to the commercial sector), argues that the integrated analysis of ‘what goes on inside the organization’ and an appreciation of performance in the ‘given’ environment is highly beneficial to the advancement of process research in strategy formation. One approach to this purpose is combining variance and process methodologies in one research effort, to include performance and the environment explicitly in an analysis of the realization of a strategy (Sminia 2009, 115). Similarly, a more process-oriented analysis of contextual influences over public management reform dynamics may well be fruitfully combined with a variable-oriented analysis of the differentiated ‘results’ of different kinds of reform. We thus argue about the potential for the analysis deriving from not constraining the process research, although we are conscious that the

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<sup>11</sup> Comparativists, when asked about whether a given programme, or practice, or (alleged) ‘solution in general would work in another country are often heard proffering as the most typical answer: ‘it depends’ (on contextual differences).

emphasis in the two approaches to conducting a case study is usually different<sup>12</sup> and, crucially, that when multiple conjunctural causation is called to play a central role in the explanatory framework, the very concept of ‘variable’ is called into question.

## Bringing ‘Micro-Level’ Theoretical Frameworks In

The research on the ‘trajectories of reform’ in public management and the differentiated responses by individual countries to the global pressures of doctrines about public sector organization like the New Public Management (NPM) is a stream of research, typified by the work of Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), that is placed at the macro-level (i.e. it examines change and continuity in the public sector of a polity as an aggregate). Other streams of research that touch upon issues of central importance for the understanding of continuity and change in the public sector, like research on the drivers of the motivation of public servants, exemplified by the stream of research on Public Service Motivation, are at the micro-level (the focus is on individuals rather than aggregates – to recall the conventional divide in economics).

These two strands seem so far to have developed mostly in parallel in the field of public management, without in-depth dialogue. One reason why the gap between the two streams seems to have been quite large may lie in the respective focus: the micro-level of individual public employees in the case of PSM, the macro-level of the public sector as a whole in the case of the reform trajectories analysis. Research methods employed may be another cause: quantitative, experimental or survey-based methods are usually preferred by scholars in the PSM stream, given the nature of the research questions addressed; qualitative, longitudinal case studies are the main research tool for scholars in the latter group.

However, bringing the concepts and frameworks of such micro-level theoretical perspectives into the analysis of reform trajectories might be extremely beneficial<sup>13</sup>. In the analysis of public

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<sup>12</sup> Event-oriented studies are usually interested in treating cases holistically, in examining the influence of context on outcomes in ways sensitive to complexity and historical specificity and that aim at generating new conceptual schemes (Ragin 1987, ix, an author who, it should be noted, is interested in the *comparative* method analysis: macro-social units are the object of analysis); variable-oriented case studies move from the appreciation that – all other things being equal – appreciation of complexity (and context) sacrifices simplicity and possibly (but not necessarily, other factors such as the degree and scope of replication and the source of the conceptual ideas - here again we agree with Langley, 1999, p. 706) this may limit generality, hence an emphasis on ‘simplifying’ through the grammar of variables. Ragin (1987, p.69) argues that the two strategies are complementary (case-oriented strategy is best suited for identifying invariant patterns common to relatively small sets of cases, variable-oriented strategy is best suited for assessing probabilistic relationships between features of social structures conceived as variables over the widest possible population of observations), since ‘the case-oriented strategy is incapacitated by a large number of cases; the variable-oriented is incapacitated by complex, conjunctural causal argument’. Our criticism, however, is about considering the two approaches to case study (variable- and event-oriented) as necessarily dichotomous (either/or) instead of tendentially distinct but potentially combinable, at least partly or for specific purposes of investigation.

<sup>13</sup> An elaboration and application to the case of Italy of such approach is developed in Belle’ and Ongaro (2012).

management reform trajectories and the causal mechanisms accounting for convergence or, vice versa and possibly more often, continued differentiation across countries, the motivational structure of civil servants and public employees at large may be both a key independent variable (e.g.: a significant difference in PSM between two countries could be one cause for different attitudes – from acceptance to outright resistance – by civil servants towards a given NPM-inspired reform, like e.g. performance-related pay) and a key dependent variable (e.g.: a change in PSM may be one crucial effect of management reform, likely to have enduring effects on public sector ‘performance’, however measured). As an independent variable, it may play a central role in qualifying the ‘context’ of a given country case, as a key component of the ‘set of values’ and ‘cultural dimension’ so often invoked in attempts to explain how the context may make a difference, a dimension that together with other structural and functional elements constitutes the ‘institutional arrangements’ that differentiate and set each country on ‘its own path’. It may also help in case selection when comparative studies are conducted: similarity and dissimilarity between cases is usually gauged by considering institutional dimensions (we thus have ‘Napoleonic’ administrative systems, or Anglo-American ones, or post-soviet), almost always overlooking other profiles like PSM (whereby clusters might be: ‘countries with low PSM’, countries with high PSM’, and intermediate categories. A reason why this has been the case is that only recently ‘large-scale’ surveys on PSM in different countries have been on the way, thus making evidence available.

As a dependent variable, changes in PSM may count as a key effect or ‘result’ of public management reform in a given policy – arguably we would count an increase in PSM as a ‘positive’ effect of management reform policies, and a decrease as a ‘negative’ effect of reforms. This is an aspect which, to our knowledge, is overlooked both in academic works and in policy papers or evaluations of administrative reforms.

## **Qualifying Causality in the Analysis of Contextual Influences**

One finding of a major study on the impact of NPM in Europe pointed out – *inter alia* - that ‘rapid turnover of governments and/or rapid change in governmental structures and functions and ministerial appointments’ is an influential factor, and one which broadly operates in the direction of inhibiting the formulation and implementation of reforms of public management, at least when these are broad-scope in nature, and reducing the internal consistency of such reforms (see Pollitt and Dan, 2011, p. 37). We would suggest that underlying such statement is an interpretation of causality in probabilistic terms. In probabilistic causality, ‘the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions largely tends to disappear’ (King et Al. 1994, 87): claims identify a causal variable and assert that this variable increases the probability of a given outcome; this claim cannot be translated into a claim about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the outcome (in the example reported by King and



Colleagues, the claim was about poor communication among superpowers during crisis increasing the likelihood of war).

How can we further our understanding and achieve a finer-grained analysis? One recent study I conducted together with Valentina Mele (Mele and Ongaro, 2012) had the purpose of investigating the impact of government turnovers, using the case of public management reform in Italy over the period 1992-2007 as an apt case for studying the dynamics of reforms under conditions of frequent government turnover. In that study – questioning how relatively intense public management reform could occur in a context of so frequent government turnover (eleven executives in fifteen years) - we argue that certain conditions for successful policy entrepreneurship (the *a priori* expertise of policy entrepreneurs, their ability to repackaging the issue, keep a community of practice alive and manoeuvre the ploys of the legal process – skills that require a different mix according to the degree of political salience and need of legal enactment characterising the area where the reform of public management is being attempted) may lead to overcome the inhibiting effect identified above of frequent government turnovers on the formulation and implementation of public management reforms. The findings of this fine-grain analysis do not invalidate the above statement about the broadly inhibiting effects of frequent government turnover, but qualify it. Thus, what in first approximation appeared as a (sort of) ‘necessary condition’ (in probabilistic causation) for reforms to occur (i.e.: the absence of frequent government turnover or rapid change in governmental structures and functions and ministerial appointments increases the likelihood of broad scope public management reform, although other conditions are influential as well), at a finer-grained analysis turned out to be ‘conditional’: different configurations of multiple causes (intersection of conditions) may allow for alternative courses of events, even in the presence of a feature of the political system that is deemed to be broadly operating in the direction of inhibiting the formulation and implementation of reforms of public management. What seems to emerge is that, under general circumstances that we characterise as ‘frequent government turnover’, certain configurations of conditions that are ‘more likely to occur’ (so to speak) will be conducive to circumstances detrimental for public management reform, whilst others ‘less likely to occur’ may still manifest themselves and lead to outcomes of implementation of public management reform. Finer-grained knowledge about such specific conditions may shed light on the likely and the less likely courses of events. However, information for putting to use such knowledge about the conditions conducive to the less likely courses of events (e.g.: the specific skills of a policy entrepreneur positioned in the right place at the right time to wield its influence on the reform policy process) are usually difficult to retrieve, hence the limits of the application of this kind of knowledge for predictive purposes.

This consideration leads to revisit, at a more general level, the issue of what notion of causality can we expect to employ in studies of contextual influences over public management reform dynamics. One definition of ‘causal effect’ is ‘the difference between the systematic component of observations made when the explanatory variable takes one value and the systematic component of comparable

observations when the explanatory variable takes on another value' (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, 81-82). The explanatory variables are the key causal variables (also called the 'cause' or the 'treatment variable') and are distinguished from the control variables. This notion, however, with its emphasis on distinguishing 'key' causal variables from control variables is contested by other Authors. In particular, this notion is sometimes 'challenged' by the idea of multiple causality. In multiple causation (Ragin 1987, x and chapter 2) 'outcomes are analyzed in terms of intersections of conditions, and it is usually assumed that any of several combinations of conditions might produce a certain outcome'. Multiple and conjunctural causation is about multiple intersecting conditions linking features of context and process to certain outcomes – and 'different conditions combine in different and sometimes contradictory ways to produce the same or similar outcomes' (which is also referred to as 'equifinality'). Such combinations of conditions are perhaps what is at work in both the 'more likely' courses of events leading to the inhibiting of public management reform under circumstances of frequent government turnover (to stick to the example) and the 'less likely' courses of events leading to implement public management reform under (notwithstanding) the same general circumstances of frequent government turnover (maybe because of a policy entrepreneur with the proper skills placed in the right place at the right time).

What can we expect to find in analyses of public management reform dynamics? Perhaps 'more often' multiple conjunctural causation (a kind of knowledge difficult to employ for predictive purposes, as we noted); maybe 'on occasion' certain necessary conditions; very rarely – we may surmise – sufficient conditions (and the distinction between necessary and sufficient causation may be blurred, since what we are left with in many instances is probabilistic causation).

As a kind of footnote, we should observe that the distinction between variables and events (already recalled and discussed above) has major implications for the very notion of causality employed: just as a hint to the debate (which cannot be addressed – even less so discussed - here), prominent Authors 'siding' on the event-oriented approach to social science research like Andrew Abbott observe that 'Our normal methods parse social reality into fixed entities with variable qualities. They attribute causality to the variables – hypostatized social characteristics – rather than to agents; variables do things, not social agents. Stories disappear. The only narratives present in such methods are just-so stories justifying this or that relation between the variables. Contingent narrative is impossible' (Abbott, 1992a, pp. 428-29) and in the same line of argumentation - moving from the *pars denstruens* to the *pars construens* of his argument - the same Author argues that '[T]he ideal [...] is a one-to-one relation between narratives and entailed-variable models. But in that case "causality" effectively means narration; the notion that the two really differ (that variables are entailed by a narrative, rather than representing it) is a fiction' (Abbott 1992b, p. 56). Whilst the Author of the present paper does not take the position that in social science research variables simply (always) disappear into events ('From Causes to Events', Abbott 1992a) and sides with Langley (1999) in considering that process research may well include variables in its methods and procedures (i.e.: that the two approaches may

ultimately be fruitfully combined), I fully recognise that this approach may be just a kind of heuristic for eschewing the difficulties of the ultimate social science foundations of the (however much needed) kind of process research that is required for advancing knowledge of public management reform dynamics (the much more limited research concern of the author of this paper).

## Conclusion

This paper reviews three issues we deem really fundamental for the progress of research about contextual influences on public management reform dynamics. First, the paper argues about (the usefulness for the development of research in this area of) bringing ‘time’ more systematically in the analysis. Interesting examples of a systematic employment of notions like ‘path-breaking’ and ‘path-establishing’ events, sequencing, reactive sequences and interaction and collision of trajectories come from studies of ‘Napoleonic’ administrative systems (Bezes, 2009; Parrado, 2008 and 2011), as are articles employing a strongly processualist approach that have focused the dynamics of public management reform in specific policy areas (Corbett, 2010; Gallego, 2003; Gallego and Barzelay, 2010; Mele 2010; Mele and Ongaro, 2012); this is curious, considering how an institutionalist rather than processualist culture is deeply rooted in the academic tradition of public management scholars in those countries (see e.g. Borgonovi, 1984), but nonetheless (or perhaps we should say ‘even more so’) a welcome spur to develop such kind of studies more broadly. What we here suggest, perhaps naively given the complex methodological issues at stake, is to adopt such process-oriented approaches to the study of public management reform not with an antagonistic attitude towards mainstream factor- or variable-oriented approaches (as if *either* process-oriented *or* variable-oriented approaches will ultimately lead us to a fuller understanding of public management reform dynamics), rather a more articulated, composite approach may be beneficial<sup>14</sup>.

Second, this paper argues about the importance of bringing ‘micro-level’ theoretical frameworks in the analysis of macro-level trajectories of reform, using as illustrative example the potential benefits that might be reaped by bringing a framework like that of public service motivation into the analysis of a reform trajectory’s causes and effects.

Third, we here revisit the kinds of ‘notion of causality’ we are more likely (so to speak) to find in studies of public management reform trajectories. Here too we argue – to the risk of being criticised for adopting a kind of ‘eclecticism’ whose foundations may ultimately be quite weak – that quite ‘positivist’ notions of causality like that outlined in the King et al. handbook need to be complemented rather than supplanted by more ‘constructivist’ approaches, like those suggested by Abbott and Ragin (and vice versa).

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<sup>14</sup> Obvious criticisms of ‘eclecticism’ may be made against the argument I here propose.

This contribution is mainly speculative in character, based on a quite random ('opportunistic') survey of previous research on contextual influences on public management reform and mainly 'anecdotal' evidence. This poses, useless to say, huge limitations to what may be claimed (in a warranted manner): a systematic review of the (often implicit) notions of causality adopted, the theories employed, and the treatment of time in studies on the dynamics of public management reforms might substantiate the claim made here about focusing these aspects as ways forward to develop our knowledge of contextual influences.

To conclude, whilst - as authoritatively reminded us by major institutions operating massively in the field ('explicit codified evidence about what works in PSM [Public Sector Management] remains in short supply', World Bank, 2011, p2) as well as by leading scholars ('[W]e are pushed towards the conclusion that for most [public management reform] programmes, most of the time, we have precious little good information about results', Pollitt 2012, p. 5) - our knowledge of contextual influences remains tremendously limited, perhaps times are ripe for undertaking paths (pathways) that, by granting these issues more systematic attention in scholarly inquiry, may contribute to advance knowledge on such an important subject.

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